Script – Print – Heartburn or Heart Attack

Knowing the Difference Can Save Your Life

We've all been there before. That time when you notice a pain in your chest that may radiate to your back, neck, throat or jaw. Does it mean you're having a cardiac event or is simply a case of heartburn?

Heartburn or acid indigestion is related to your esophagus. But since the esophagus and heart are located close to one another, either one can cause chest pain, which is why people can mistake the pain for either heartburn or something much more severe.

"Indirectly the vicinity of the esophagus and the heart are so near each other the nerve supplies are really similar," said Dr. Syed Zaidi, lead physician, family medicine, OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center. "That's why there is an overlap in terms of symptoms, even radiation of pain going to your throat, your jaw, your arm, your back. That's what makes it so hard, even the most experienced clinicians have difficulty distinguishing between the two."

Heartburn is a common condition that's caused by stomach acids rising up into your esophagus. The pain is usually worsened after a meal, lying down, bending over or anything that increases the pressure in your abdomen will start to increase pressure in your chest.

According to Dr. Zaidi, heart attack symptoms can include tightness, pressure in your chest, shortness of breath, cold sweats and lightheadedness or sudden dizziness.

"Often many times a patient will have already taken a tums, a Zantac, a Pepcid, something in their grandmother's purse," said Dr. Syed Zaidi, lead physician, family medicine, OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center. "It might actually get better or go away. But that doesn't rule out that it was just heartburn or heart attack. So looking back at are you a smoker, are you overweight, do you have a family history, or are there people in the family who've had heart attacks at a younger age, or if your age is related. So we're looking at 40 or above 40. Women sometimes present a little atypical. So in my opinion, what I tell my patients is when in doubt you get it checked out, right?"

That means calling 911, visiting the Emergency Department or contacting your physician. A workup might be in order, including a stress test or EKG. It if turns out to be heartburn, Dr. Zaidi said there are plenty of over the counter medications to choose from. Lifestyle changes, including diet and exercise, might be in order. Stress and lack of sleep are other risk factors. But getting a diagnosis will certainly help give you a peace of mind.